Forgotten Pages:
Black Literary Magazines in the 1920s

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Towards the end of his life, Langston Hughes wrote an article about Harlem during the 1920s. In his narration, he paused fondly over memories of Sugar Hill. At 409 Edgecombe, the address of the 'tallest apartment house' on the hill, lived Walter and Gladys White, who gave frequent parties for their friends; Aaron and Alta Douglas, who 'always had a bottle of ginger ale in the ice box for those who brought along refreshments'; Elmer Anderson Carter, who succeeded Charles S. Johnson to the editorship of Opportunity; and actor Ivan Sharpe and his wife Evie. Just below the hill, in the Dunbar Apartments, lived W. E. B. Du Bois as well as E. Simms Campbell, the cartoonist. Nearby was Dan Burley, a black journalist and a boogie-woogie piano player. Hughes recalled the excitement of those days: 'Artists and writers were always running into each other on Sugar Hill and talking over their problems and wondering how they could get fellowships and grants from benevolent organizations. One evening, Hughes and six of his compatriots gathered in the Aaron Douglas apartment and decided to start a literary magazine, 'the better to express ourselves freely and independently — without interference from old heads, white or Negro.'¹ From that initial discussion at 409 Edgecombe came Fire in its one and only issue of November 1926. Two years later, some of the same persons began another literary magazine, this time called Harlem.

During the decade, similar conclaves of black artists met throughout the United States. These groups, which have received little notice, included Krigwa of New York and other cities, Dixwell of New Haven, the Scribblers of Baltimore, the Saturday Nighters of Washington, D.C., the Writers Guild at Fisk, the Ethiopian Guild of Indianapolis, the Gilpins of Cleveland, the

Ethiopian Folk Theater of Chicago, the Book and Bench in Topeka, the Dallas players of Texas, and the Ink Slingers of California. In addition to their other activities, most of these organizations hoped to encourage Negro art through publishing ‘little magazines’. Only a few actually did begin periodicals; among those few were the Boston Quill Club, which produced the *Saturday Evening Quill*, a group in Philadelphia which issued *Black Opals*, and a literary society at Howard University which published the *Stylus*.

Students of the period have not noticed the publications from these smaller groups. Instead, they have concentrated on the NAACP magazine, *Crisis*, founded by Du Bois in 1910; the socialistic *Messenger*, which was started by A. Philip Randolph with Chandler Owen in 1917 and which eventually became a platform for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and the Urban League’s journal, *Opportunity*, begun by Charles Johnson in 1923.

When discussing Negro literature of the 1920s, scholars usually say little about *Messenger*, seeing the journal primarily as an arm of social action, not of artistic expression. They comment more fully, but still not enough, on *Opportunity* and Johnson’s efforts to promote the arts. In *Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan Huggins noted that *Opportunity* especially ‘believed its motto — “Not Alms but Opportunity” — to apply to the arts’.²

Historians pay particular attention to *Crisis* and the role of Du Bois in the Negro Renaissance. Elliot Rudwick stated that ‘no Negro writer could help but have been stimulated by *The Crisis* editor’s lyrical and plaintive pieces.’ In his journal, Du Bois himself claimed that ‘practically every Negro author writing today found his first audience through the pages of *The Crisis*.’ Among his discoveries, Du Bois numbered Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes and painters Wilbur Scott and Richard Brown. Du Bois did give early publication to many writers. At the same time, though, he maintained ideas which began to separate him from those very writers and from the literary periodicals which would emerge later in the decade. In a controversial statement often cited from *Crisis*, Du Bois disclaimed any notion of art for art’s sake:

all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

*Messenger* and *Opportunity* differed in their response to literature and other matters, but all three magazines were significant to the literary Renaissance. As Huggins stated, ‘each of these magazines saw as part of its role the

encouragement of Negroes’ work in the arts and the publishing of their achievement for blacks and whites to see.

Few writers have said anything about the literary periodicals of the period—Stylus, Fire, Harlem, Black Opals and the Saturday Evening Quill. In their studies, scholars customarily indicate no understanding that such journals ever existed. Occasionally, they refer to Fire, rarely to Harlem and almost never to the other three publications. Huggins, for example, commented briefly on Fire and Harlem, calling them ‘short-lived magazines...Harlem’s attempts at “little” magazines’. He later devoted several lines to Fire, quoting material from Langston Hughes’s The Big Sea. Nowhere did he examine the significance of Fire and Harlem or mention comparable periodicals in other urban centres. Only Langston Hughes, in his autobiography and his article of 1966, gave significant insight into Fire. Hughes did not, though, allude to Harlem or the other three literary journals. Despite such responses, these magazines provide particular insights into Negro literature of the 1920s and thus merit attention.

II

The impetus towards such journals came in the winter of 1915–16 when Professors Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory organized a literary society on the Howard campus. Called Stylus, the group included students, to be selected from biannual competitions, and several faculty and honorary members. Originally, the organization felt itself in the tradition of the Hartford Wits, an informal club formed chiefly by Yale graduates in the late eighteenth century. Despite initial proclivities, Stylus charted a route far different from that maintained by the Hartford writers. From the beginning, members wanted to encourage artistic expression in the black community, especially among youth. They hoped thereby to stimulate black writing which would be considered on an equal footing with other literatures and which would create respect for the Negro population in the United States. Gregory remem-


5 With the exception of the last two numbers of Black Opals, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center of Howard University holds copies of the extant issues of these journals. Our thanks go to the Research Center for the use of these increasingly rare copies.
bered that the society had 'a vision, a vision which embodied in the not too distant future a Negro literature that should secure recognition along with that of other peoples'. The *Howard University Record*, in later years, recalled that the efforts of Stylus were not limited to Howard University, but that they extended 'to the Negro race and to civilization'. Benjamin Brawley noted that the organization 'hoped to make a genuine contribution to racial advance'. To further their ends, Locke and his associates issued the first purely literary magazine published at any Negro college. Appearing in June 1916, *Stylus* featured student efforts and special contributions by honorary members, such as William Stanley Braithwaite, Benjamin G. Brawley and James Weldon Johnson.6

World War I interrupted the work, sending Stylus members and supporters to distant parts. Efforts did not resume until peace returned and a handful of old members came back to campus. With that nucleus, Professors Locke and Gregory attracted new student members, including Zora Neale Hurston, and additional honorary members, notably Charles W. Chestnutt, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alice Moore Dunbar and Arthur A. Schomburg. The second number of *Stylus* appeared in May 1921.

In his 'Foreword' to that issue, Montgomery Gregory voiced sentiments which would be echoed by 'New Negroes' emerging in the latter half of the decade. 'It becomes clearer daily', he stated,

that it must be through the things of the Spirit that we shall ultimately restore Ethiopia to her seat of honor among the races of the world. The Germans have amply demonstrated the futility of force to secure a place in the sun. Any individual or people must depend upon the universal appeal of art, literature, painting, and music — to secure the real respect and recognition of mankind.

Gregory urged his colleagues onward, with promise of better days ahead:

'The *Stylus* is on the right track although like all bearers of Truth they are in a minority for a day. Theirs are the future years, rich with the promise of a fulfilment of the visions of those whose love for their race embraces humanity.'7 *Stylus* reserved further statements for future years. The third number, to be discussed later, did not appear until 1929.

Probably the most outstanding student of the Stylus organization, during the early years, was Zora Hurston. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks On A Road*, she traced her literary career from her involvement in the Howard group. She explained how Charles Johnson, who was then planning the first issue of *Opportunity*, read a short story of hers published in *Stylus*, apparently

6 'Foreword: Greeting', *Stylus*, 1 (May 1921), 6; 'The Stylus', *Howard University Record*, 19 (May 1925), 372; 'Visions of the Dawn', *Stylus* (June 1934), p. 2. The issues of *Stylus* following May 1921 were assigned neither a volume nor a number.

7 'Foreword: Greeting', *Stylus*, 1 (May 1911), 6.
'John Redding Goes To Sea', and asked her to contribute to his magazine. Hurston sent him 'Drenched in Light', which he published. Later he published her second story, 'Spunk', and counselled her to live in Harlem, the better to find an outlet for her literary talent. Hurston responded enthusiastically: 'So, beginning to feel the urge to write, I wanted to be in New York.'

After her trip to Harlem and her subsequent involvement in the artistic community there, she began to value Johnson as 'the root of the so-called Negro Renaissance': he convinced young writers to come to New York; he encouraged them by accepting their contributions to his journal; he sought out new talent through his Opportunity Award dinners. Hurston believed that the much-acclaimed Locke, her former professor, owed Charles Johnson a great debt: Locke's The New Negro (1925) was 'the same material, for the most part, gathered and published by Dr. Charles Spurgeon Johnson'. She concluded that 'the so-called Negro Renaissance...was his work, and only his hush-mouth nature has caused it to be attributed to many others'. In The Big Sea, Langston Hughes made similar claims. He stated that Johnson, as editor of Opportunity, 'did more to encourage and develop Negro writers during the 1920's than anyone else in America. He wrote them sympathetic letters, pointing out the merits of their work. He brought them together to meet and know each other. He made the Opportunity contests sources of discovery and help.'

Charles Johnson showed much acumen as an editor, particularly when compared with those who founded Fire in 1926. In his 1966 article and his autobiography, Hughes detailed the beginning and end of that little magazine. At Aaron Douglas's apartment, Hughes and six others chose a name for their journal, divided up the responsibilities, and made a passing nod in the direction of finances. They selected Fire as a title because, in the words of Hughes, they desired to 'épater le bourgeois, to burn up a lot of the old stereotyped Uncle Tom ideas of the past, and to provide...an outlet for publishing not existing in the hospitable but limited pages of The Crisis or Opportunity'.

The editorial board included Wallace Thurman, as editor, Aaron Douglas, as artist and designer, John P. Davis, as business manager, artist and writer Bruce Nugent, short story writer Zora Hurston, poet Langston Hughes and

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poet Gwendolyn Bennett, also affiliated with *Opportunity* and later with *Black Opals*.

The group was certainly talented but surely uninformed in matters of business. They began the journal with very insufficient funds, even for one issue. Each member of the board was to contribute fifty dollars for initial expenses. Because only Wallace Thurman had a steady job, he assumed responsibility for the bills; this was a generous but costly gesture. Hughes wondered how the number ever left the printer’s office: ‘How Thurman was able to persuade the printer to release the entire issue to us on so small an advance payment, I do not know. But he did.’

The bills were enormous because the seven chose a needlessly expensive format. Hughes recalled that ‘only the best cream-white paper would do on which to print our poems and stories. And only a rich crimson jacket on de luxe stock would show off well the Aaron Douglas cover design’. As a result, there was money neither for advertising nor distributing the journal. And there was no coherent plan for funding a second issue. On an introductory page of the first number, the editorial board made a limp plea for support:

Being a non-commercial product interested only in the arts, it is necessary that we make some appeal for aid from interested friends. For the second issue of *FIRE* we would appreciate having fifty people subscribe ten dollars each, and fifty more to subscribe five dollars each. We make no eloquent or rhetorical plea. *FIRE* speaks for itself.

The editors of those journals which lasted the decade, both black editors and those who were white, such as Harriet Monroe of *Poetry*, knew that a periodical could never sustain itself with such a lacklustre appeal.

After November 1926, *Fire* never reappeared. ‘When the editorial board of *Fire* met again, we did not plan a new issue’, Hughes remembered, ‘but emptied our pockets to help poor Thurman whose wages were being garnished weekly because he had signed for the printer’s bills’. Thurman’s wages continued to be ‘garnished’ for three or four more years, even after ‘the bulk of the whole issue’ burned to ashes in the basement of the apartment in which it was stored.9

The end was ironic, particularly because fire had been the unifying metaphor in the periodical. To make the title appear as an alarm, the board placed two exclamation marks after the word — *Fire* ! ! The editor autographed special copies, including the one in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center of Howard University, with ‘Flamingly, Wallace Thurman’. The ‘Foreword’ reinforced the dominant motif and consequently deserves full quotation:

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FIRE...flaming, burning, searing, and penetrating far beneath the superficial items of the flesh to boil the sluggish blood.

FIRE...a cry of conquest in the night, warning those who sleep and revitalizing those who linger in the quiet places dozing.

FIRE...melting steel and iron bars, poking livid tongues between stone apertures and burning wooden opposition with a cackling chuckle of contempt.

FIRE...weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon bordered loom and satisfying pagan thirst for beauty unadorned...the flesh is sweet and real...the soul an inward flush of fire...Beauty?...flesh on fire — on fire in the furnace of life blazing....

'Fy-ah,
Fy-ah, Lawd,
Fy-ah gonna burn ma soul!' 

The poetry section announced itself with the title from Countee Cullen's poem and appeared as 'Flame From The Dark Tower'. The issue concluded with 'A Department of Comment' by Thurman, called 'Fire Burns'. In those pages, he cried freedom for black writers, saying 'it would seem that any author preparing to write about Negroes in Harlem or anywhere else...should take whatever phases of their life that seem the most interesting to him, and develop them as he pleases'.

Editor Thurman preferred the less reputable side, as his inclusions in Fire indicate. The three short stories featured characters falling far short of standards dear to the bourgeoisie, both black and white. 'Cordelia The Crude: A Harlem Sketch', by Wallace Thurman, presented the early career of 'a fus' class chippie'; 'Wedding Day', by Gwendolyn Bennett, told of the violence and despair in Paul Watson, a black American who emigrated to Paris because of 'his intense hatred of American white folks'; 'Sweat', by Zora Hurston, narrated the tragic end of Sykes, a loafer who lost everything, including his life, because of an obsession with fat black women — 'Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen!'

The issue also included the first part of a novel by Richard Bruce, called 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade'. In his narration, Bruce detailed the amours of bisexual black artist Alex, known to his male lover Adrian (alias Beauty) as Duce. One scene, in particular, violated the sensibilities of the middle class on both sides of the colour line: 'Alex ran his hand through Beauty's hair...Beauty's lips pressed hard against his teeth...Alex trembled...could feel Beauty's body...close against his...hot...tense...white...and soft...soft...soft...'

10 Fire, pp. 1, 15, 48, 6, 25, 41, 38.
The poetry section began with Cullen's poem. Thurman and the others liked the selection, partly because of its defiant but technically graceful introduction: 'We shall not always plant while others reap / The golden increment of bursting fruit...' 'A Southern Road' immediately followed. Written by Helene Johnson, who later became part of the Boston Quill Club, the poem described the victim of a lynching: 'A blue-fruitied black gum / ... Bears a dangling figure, - / Sacrificial dower to the raff, / Swinging alone, / A solemn, tortured shadow in the air.'

The section contained 'Elevator Boy', a controversial poem by Langston Hughes. The selection bothered many, because the protagonist showed no evidence of the American work ethic: 'I been runnin' this / Elevator too long. / Guess I'll quit now.' 'Flame From The Dark Tower' featured another poet worthy of comment. Lewis Alexander, who was a member of the Washington Saturday Nighters and also of the Quill Club, contributed two poems, one of them about a prostitute ironically called 'Little Cinderella', a girl who did not wait for her prince: 'Look me over, kid! / I knows I'm neat, - / Little Cinderella from head to feet. / Drinks all night at Club Alabam, - / What comes next I don't give a damn! ...'

Reactions to Fire were mixed. As Langston Hughes noted, the white press largely ignored the journal, except for Bookman, which reviewed the periodical in November 1926. In The Big Sea, Hughes called that appraisal 'excellent', an adjective he wisely removed from his 1966 discussion of the same material. The Bookman review shifted in tone, telling blacks first to lift themselves into the middle class by their own bootstraps and then suggesting that Negro art should be separate and distinct from 'American literature'. The anonymous writer, who was perhaps editor John Farrar, initially commended Fire for appearing 'at a time when the Negro shows ominous signs of settling down to become a good American'. He continued: 'As the Negro begins more and more to measure up to the white yardstick of achievement, he will gain a merited position in American society...'. By his conclusion, the reviewer was complimenting Fire for encouraging 'separate but equal' in the arts: 'It is to be hoped that he [the black artist] will find in this new Negro quarterly the thing he needs to keep his artistic individuality' - so much for the white press.12

According to Hughes, the black press was more voluble and quite indignant, as the editorial board expected it would be: 'As we had hoped - even though it contained no four-letter words as do today's little magazines - the Negro bourgeoisie were shocked by Fire.' The literary reviewer for the Balti-

11 'Flame From The Dark Tower', Fire, pp. 16, 17, 20, 23.
12 'A Challenge To The Negro', Bookman, 64 (November 1926), 258-9.
more Afro-American wrote an angry letter to Thurman, saying, 'I have just tossed the first issue of Fire into the fire'. In The Big Sea, although not in the 1966 article, Hughes also claimed that 'Dr Du Bois in the Crisis roasted it', although he provided no supporting quotation. Actually, the reactions in the black community were more complex than Hughes indicated.\textsuperscript{13}

In January 1927, the Crisis 'Looking Glass' commented on Fire. Rather than 'roast' the journal, the reviewer praised Aaron Douglas's illustrations and the expensive format selected to highlight those contributions. At the end of his note, he even endorsed the publication: 'We acknowledge the receipt of the first number of Fire "devoted to Younger Negro Artists". It is strikingly illustrated by Aaron Douglas and is a beautiful piece of printing... We bespeak for it wide support.'\textsuperscript{14}

Opportunity spoke more enthusiastically about Fire. In 'The Dark Tower', his monthly column, Countee Cullen endorsed the journal. With the support of Charles Johnson, he called Fire 'the outstanding birth of the month.' He then suggested, tongue-in-cheek, that the number might bother unsophisticated readers: 'There seems to have been a wish to shock in this first issue, and, though shock-proof ourselves, we imagine that the wish will be well realized among the readers of Fire.' He found 'ample extenuation' for Bruce's 'Smoke, Lilies, and Jade', considered 'a reprehensible story' by many, in its technical execution and fine phrasing. He applauded the format, particularly the 'startlingly vivid Douglas cover done in red and black', and contributions by Zora Hurston. Cullen thought both Douglas and Hurston 'noteworthy for their method of treating racial subjects in a successfully detached manner.' He anticipated the next issue: 'This sort of success, more than any other, augurs good for the development of Negro artists.'\textsuperscript{15}

III

The demise of Fire educated Hughes in the ways of literary periodicals: 'That taught me a lesson about little magazines. But since white folks had them, we Negroes thought we could have one, too. But we didn't have the money.' Hughes learned not to involve himself again in such a venture. Thurman responded in a different way - he 'laughed a long bitter laugh', as Hughes recalled.\textsuperscript{16} But then he quit laughing and began work on another journal. The one and only issue of Harlem appeared in November 1928 with Thurman as editor, Richard Bruce as contributing editor, and Aaron Douglas as art editor. The contributors included a panoply of distinguished names: Langston Hughes; Helene Johnson; Alain Locke; Theophilus Lewis,

\textsuperscript{13} 'The Twenties', pp. 19-20; The Big Sea, p. 237.
\textsuperscript{14} Crisis, 33 (January 1927), 158.
\textsuperscript{15} Opportunity, 5 (January 1927). 25.
\textsuperscript{16} The Big Sea, p. 238.
formerly connected with the *Messenger* and a critic of drama; George Schuyler, earlier associated with the *Messenger* and in 1928 the editor of a ‘new Negro newspaper syndicate’; and Walter White, author and assistant secretary of the NAACP.\textsuperscript{17}

Thurman saw *Harlem* as a new type of black literary periodical. In his editorial, he sketched the history of Negro magazines, beginning with ‘the old propagandistic journals’, such as *Crisis, Opportunity*, and *Messenger*, which had served their day but were ‘emotionally unprepared to serve a new day and a new generation’. All they could offer the aspiring young writer was an occasional page—‘But the artist was not satisfied to be squeezed between jeremiads or have his work thrown haphazardly upon a page where there was no effort to make it look beautiful as well as sound beautiful’. The only recourse for the black artist, until the latter 1920s, was the white press. Few Negroes, though, would continually buy ‘white magazines’ in order to read an occasional poem or short story by a black author.

In 1926, *Fire* seemed to herald a new day. As Thurman remembered, it ‘was the pioneer of the movement. It flamed for one issue and caused a sensation the like of which had never been known in Negro journalism before.’ When it failed, other publications emerged, such as *Black Opals* in Philadelphia, ‘a more conservative yet extremely worthwhile venture’, and the *Saturday Evening Quill* in Boston, which was published by and for members of a literary group. These little magazines had problems, however, as Thurman so well recalled: ‘The art magazines, unsoundly financed as they were, could not last.’

Thurman hoped to solve those problems with *Harlem*, and thus he subtitled the journal, ‘A Forum of Negro Life’. Primarily, he would include short stories and poetry, as he had in *Fire*. He would, though, reach out for a larger audience by featuring essays on current events, as well as more ‘intimate’ essays, and by publishing competent white writers as well as black. The journal ‘wants merely’, he said, ‘to be a forum in which all people’s opinions may be presented intelligently and from which the Negro can gain some universal idea of what is going on in the world of thought and art’. By adopting a conciliatory tone, Thurman hoped to garner support from some of those quarters which had previously rejected him and his efforts. Continuing to use the third person, he explained that ‘it [*Harlem*] enters the field without any preconceived editorial prejudices, without intolerance, without a reformer’s cudgel’.\textsuperscript{18}

To emphasize his basic approach, he included an essay by the statesmanlike

\textsuperscript{17} ‘Our Contributors’, *Harlem*, 1 (November 1928), 21–2.

\textsuperscript{18} ‘Editorial’, *Harlem*, pp. 21–2.
Alain Locke. In ‘Art or Propaganda?’ Locke agreed with Thurman that the time for ‘weeping and moaning’ was past. He concluded that ‘all our purely artistic publications have been sporadic’ because they could not consistently meet the requirements of Crisis, Messenger and Opportunity, journals which had been the only recourse to black artists and which were ‘the avowed organs of social movements and organized social programs’. ‘There is all the greater need then for a sustained vehicle of free and purely artistic expression’, said Locke. ‘If HARLEM should happily fill this need, it will perform an honorable and constructive service.’

Thurman began his journal with an essay he had solicited from Walter White. At the onset of the article, ‘For Whom Shall the Negro Vote?’, White quoted from Thurman’s letter to him, which had asked for a discussion of ‘“the dilemma of Negro voters today – surveying the attitude of the old guard toward loyalty to the Republican party and the attitude of another group which is openly advocating a bolt from the traditional party of our fathers”’.

In his analysis, White adopted a moderate, well-balanced tone, seemingly in keeping with Thurman’s approach to his new journal. He acknowledged great inadequacies in Al Smith and Herbert Hoover, candidates for the United States presidency, but he did not call for new political parties. Seeing that black voters held a balance of power in about ten states, he urged Negroes to ‘trade ballots for justice’, to make white candidates listen to the needs of black people.¹⁹

So far so good. With the first essay, Harlem did appear as a journal much different from Fire. As the reader proceeded into the journal, however, he encountered short stories and poems similar to those printed in Fire. Hughes contributed three poems dealing with drunkenness, boredom and jazz, and a short story called ‘Luani of the Jungles’, which portrayed the fatal attraction between a white European man and a black African woman. The other short stories offered pictures no more appealing to the black bourgeoisie. Roy de Coverly’s ‘Holes’ and George W. Little’s ‘Two Dollars’ both dealt in prostitution and murder. Only George Schuyler offered a respectable character in ‘Woof’, a story about the courageous and commanding First Sergeant William Glass of Company H, Twenty-Fifth U.S. Infantry.

Thurman had planned succeeding issues of Harlem. With this in mind, he challenged readers to support his effort. In the last page of his editorial he wrote: ‘It now remains to be seen whether the Negro public is as ready for such a publication as the editors and publishers of Harlem believe it to be.’ He gave further evidence of his plans at the end of the journal, when he listed prominent writers who had been asked to contribute to future issues, such as

¹⁹ Harlem, pp. 12, 5–7, 45.
Heywood Broun, a columnist for the New York *Telegram* and the *Nation*; Clarence Darrow, ‘noted liberal and attorney’; Eugene Gordon, editor of the *Saturday Evening Quill*; Charles Johnson, former editor of *Opportunity*; Claude McKay, author of *Home to Harlem*; H. L. Mencken, editor of the *American Mercury*; and Frank Alvah Parsons, President of the New York Schools of Fine and Applied Arts.

As a literary editor, Thurman failed once again, and for several reasons. First of all, he had not achieved a journal sufficiently different from *Fire*. Too many readers undoubtedly associated the second periodical with the first. Then, too, the journal materialized just before the financial crash of 1929. In those days, no literary periodicals were finding easy financing and many were quietly slipping out of existence. With the catapulting difficulties of the times, few were in a mood to notice the loss of a once-promising periodical. And so few said anything when they waited in vain for the second number of *Harlem*. Responses in the press were negligible, as were comments afforded later in published reminiscences of the period and in autobiographies. Much research uncovered only sparing references, one of the few stated in the autobiography of George Schuyler, entitled *Black and Conservative*. Schuyler remembered the journal chiefly because it included his story ‘Woof’, which he considered one of his best literary portraits. 20

The loss of *Harlem* disillusioned Thurman. He never again attempted a literary journal, and he became more and more convinced of the failure of the Negro Renaissance. In *Infants of the Spring* (1932), Thurman compared the black twenties to a scene at a drunken party. Raymond, who represented Thurman, described the situation: ‘Whites and blacks clung passionately together as if trying to effect a permanent merger. Liquor, jazz music, and close physical contact had achieved what decades of propaganda had advocated with little success.’ Raymond concluded that ‘this ... is the Negro renaissance, and this is about all the whole damn thing is going to amount to’. Through his protagonist, Thurman also re-evaluated some of the main figures of the period. He reserved a gentle satire for Alain Locke, who ‘played mother hen to a brood of chicks, he having appointed himself guardian angel to the current set of younger Negro artists’. 21 Parke appeared several times in the novel, always ‘clucking’ after a brood of scattering chicks.

IV

While *Fire* and then *Harlem* were making their début, other little magazines surfaced elsewhere on the east coast and also elicited the attention of

Alain Locke, among others. In the spring of 1927, *Black Opals* came to the fore under the direction of Arthur Fauset, a teacher in the Philadelphia public schools, and with the support of a group of young, primarily local, Negro writers. Two other issues followed, the Christmas 1927 number under the leadership of guest editor Gwendolyn Bennett and an editorial staff composed of Fauset, Nellie Bright, Allan Freelon and James Young; and the June 1928 number, under the control of the same editorial board, with the exception of Bennett.

The first issue included a statement of purpose: *Black Opals* ‘is the result of the desire of older New Negroes to encourage younger members of the group who demonstrate talent and ambition’. The statement continued, expressing ideas reminiscent of those given earlier in *Stylus*, another magazine directed towards youth: the journal ‘does not purport to be an aggregation of masters and masterpieces. These expressions, with the exception of contributions by recognized New Negro artists, are the embryonic outpourings of aspiring young Negroes living for the most part in Philadelphia. Their message is one of determination, hope, and we trust, power’. The ‘aspiring young Negroes’, who primarily wrote poetry, were students in the Philadelphia public schools and at the Philadelphia Normal Schools, Temple University, and the University of Pennsylvania. With the possible exception of Mae V. Cowdery, then a senior at the Philadelphia High School for Girls, most of these students did not emerge later as established poets. The ‘older New Negroes’ were identified explicitly on the contributors page of the first number: ‘LEWIS ALEXANDER is a well known New Negro poet . . . ; ‘LANGSTON HUGHES is the well known New Negro poet’; ‘ALAIN LOCKE, author of “The New Negro”, is the father of the New Negro movement’.

From a historical perspective, the most significant material in all three numbers is ‘Hail Philadelphia’, a short essay written by Locke and included in the first issue. The essay deserves examination, partly because it shows Locke as politician, steering cleverly between the old ways and the new, endorsing the new without a flat rejection of the old. To introduce his thesis, Locke criticized the elders of Philadelphia, but with humour:

Philadelphia is the shrine of the Old Negro. More even than in Charleston or New Orleans, Baltimore or Boston, what there is of the tradition of breeding and respectability in the race lingers in the old Negro families of the city that was Tory before it was Quaker. Its faded daguerotypes [sic] stare stiffly down at all newcomers, including the New Negro (who we admit, is an upstart) – and ask, ‘who was your grandfather?’ and failing a ready answer – ‘who freed you?’

In his next paragraph, Locke made a gesture towards the ‘Old Negro’ of Philadelphia and elsewhere, saying that ‘I was taught to sing “Hail Phila-
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delphia” (to the tune of the Russian anthem), to reverence my elders and fear God in my own village’. After a few more conciliatory lines, he turned to the youth, and remained in that direction to the end of his comments. He warned young readers about the past: ‘I hope Philadelphia youth will realize that the past can enslave more than the oppressor...’ To emphasize his message, Locke came towards his conclusion with a metaphor:

if the birth of the New Negro among us halts in the shell of conservatism, threatens to suffocate in the close air of self complacency and snugness, then the egg shell must be smashed to pieces and the living thing freed. And more of them I hope will be ugly ducklings, children too strange for the bondage of the barnyard provincialism, who shall some day fly in the face of the sun and seek the open seas.

Interestingly, Locke selected the very imagery Thurman would associate with him in *Infants of the Spring*. Quieting his essay, Locke ended with a direct address to young black writers willing to experiment: ‘Greetings to those of you who are daring new things. I want to sing a “Hail Philadelphia” that is less a chant for the dead and more a song for the living. For especially for the Negro, I believe in the “life to come”.’

Locke established a tone for the journal, but he did not control the publication. Arthur Fauset, the moving force behind the journal, was more conservative than Locke, even though he could make a gesture in the philosopher’s direction. Fauset was not, to use Locke’s image, in a mood to smash the ‘egg shell...to pieces’. Neither was he in a position to do so, publishing mostly the ‘embryonic outpourings’ of interested students. The third and last number of *Black Opals* ends with Fauset’s review of *Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen. Fauset began the review with sentiments which could have been endorsed by Locke, and others. He praised Larsen’s novel as ‘a step forward’ in Afro-American literature: ‘For the first time, perhaps, a Negro author has succeeded in writing a novel about colored characters in which the propaganda motive is decidedly absent’. But then Fauset went on to qualify his allusion to propaganda. In so doing, he stated views which were decidedly conservative when compared to Locke’s and Thurman’s enunciations in *Harlem*. Fauset claimed that the propaganda novel, like the ‘pure’ literature advanced by many ‘New Negroes’, had its place: ‘If the “pure” artist desires to create pure art, then of course let him create pure art; but whoever set up any group of Negroes to demand that all art by Negroes must conform to such a standard?’ With such comments, Fauset suggested that *Black Opals* was not a radical publication, even though it supported much of the new black

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22 *Black Opals*, 1 (Spring 1927), inside back cover, front page, 3.
23 ‘Quicksand’, *Black Opals*, 1 (June 1928), 19.
literature. Like *Stylus*, it wanted to teach the young, not shock their elders. As Thurman said in *Harlem*, *Black Opals* was ‘a more conservative’ effort than his own, yet ‘extremely worthwhile’.

As ‘a more conservative’ periodical, *Black Opals* never confronted the type of maelstrom engulfing *Fire*. Rather than create controversy, it elicited comments ranging from mild approval to enthusiastic endorsement. In the past, *Opportunity* had encouraged the new magazines more than had the other Negro publications; it proved no exception this time. In a February 1928 column of ‘Ebony Flute’, Gwendolyn Bennett recalled ‘the rare pleasure’ she had in editing the second number of *Black Opals*. More importantly, she noted a proposed visit between the Philadelphia and Boston literary groups, thereby suggesting that the individual societies did not work in isolation from one another: ‘I understand that the *Black Opals* have been asked to visit the *Quill Club* in Boston in the spring of the year. Such interchange is good’. With others, Bennett saw such interchange as a significant event in the evolving Negro Renaissance: ‘mayhap some year both of these groups with one or two of New York’s younger, newer Negroes will get together and go to visit the *Ink Slingers* in California.’

Countee Cullen also found hope in the efforts of these literary societies. In ‘*The Dark Tower*’, he commended the Philadelphia journal, reserving special praise for poems by Nellie Bright and Mae Cowdery. Like Bennett, he hoped the Negro Renaissance would spread across the land, enveloping urban centres from the east to the west coast. ‘*The Black Opals* venture is one which’, he asserted, ‘we should like to see sweep the country as the Little Theatre movement has done.’

The Boston Quill Club issued the first number of the *Saturday Evening Quill* in the very month when the Philadelphia group brought forth the last number of *Opals*, June 1928. For the next two years, the *Quill* appeared annually, the second number in April 1929 and the third and final number in June 1930. The officers of the Quill Club, and those responsible for the journal, were Eugene Gordon as president, Grace Vera Postles as secretary, and Florence Harmon as treasurer. Gordon, who also served as editor of the *Quill*, was on the editorial staff of the Boston *Post*. Florence Harmon had been a student at the Gordon College of Theology and Missions, in Boston, had contributed a short story to her college year book and had also contributed to the Boston *Post*. The secretary of the Club, Grace Postles, was a graduate of Cheney State Normal School and, when the *Quill* first came out, a student at the Emerson School of Oratory.

Other introductions are in order, since participants in the Quill Club have

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24 ‘*Ebony Flute*’, 6 (February 1928), 56; ‘*The Dark Tower*’, 5 (June 1927), 180.
not occupied many pages in literary histories. Members and frequent contributors to the journal included Waring Cuney, a student of music in Boston who had been published in the *Black Opals* and had won top prizes in the second *Opportunity* contest for his poem, ‘No Images’; Alvirah Hazzard, a teacher in the Boston public schools who had contributed several short stories to the *Boston Post*; George Reginald Margetson, a native of St Kitts, British West Indies, who had been published in several anthologies of Negro poetry; Florida Ridley, formerly a teacher in the Boston public schools and an assistant editor of *Women’s Era*, who had contributed to *Opportunity* and *Our Boston*; and, among others, Dorothy West, who first published in the *Boston Post* and who won half of *Opportunity*’s second prize in 1926 for her short story, ‘The Typewriter’. In *Infants of the Spring*, Wallace Thurman reserved laurels for only a handful of Renaissance writers; among those few were Dorothy West and Helene Johnson, also a distinguished member of the Quill Club. Through Raymond, Thurman praised the two for their ‘freshness and naiveté which he and his cronies had lost’ and for their skill as writers: ‘surprisingly enough for Negro prodigies, they actually gave promise of possessing literary talent’.

With ‘A Statement to the Reader’, printed in the first issue of the *Quill*, Club members expressed their reasons for publishing a journal. As the statement indicated, they did not want to start a revolution; they did not want to make money, never offering the *Quill* for sale until the third issue; neither did they want to exhibit their literary wares before a wide audience. On behalf of his colleagues, Gordon wrote: ‘They have not published it [the *Quill*] because they think any of it “wonderful”, or “remarkable”, or “extraordinary”, or “unusual”, or even “promising”. They have published it because, being human, they are possessed of the very human traits of vanity and egotism.’ In other words, they wanted to try their work out, preferably on a close circle of friends. As explained further, they paid for their publication out of their own pockets. Evidently their pockets were more full than those of Thurman and associates, since they could sustain their effort for three years.

Unlike *Opals*, which specialized in verse, the *Quill* printed fiction, drama, poetry, essays and illustrations. Some of the selections had a decidedly conservative message, such as the poem by George Margetson, which lauded Abraham Lincoln as the black saviour – ‘To every dark-skinned child a hope he gave, / And made four million hearts beat happily’. Most of the contributions, though, dealt with themes that had become conventional in Negro literary periodicals of the latter twenties – the problems of unemployment,

25 *The Saturday Evening Quill*, 1 (June 1928), inside back cover; *Infants of the Spring*, p. 231.
26 *Quill*, 1 (June 1928), front page; ‘Abraham Lincoln’, *Quill*, 1 (June 1928), 34.
the resultant tension between husband and wife, particularly when wife alone works, and the temptation to ‘pass’ if one were ‘high-yaller’ or light-skinned. The same material had appeared in *Fire* and *Harlem*, but with different treatment. Thurman’s writers often employed southern, rural dialects and included terms like ‘nigger’ and ‘coon’. Eugene Gordon and his colleagues depended on standard educated English, the type of language they used in their everyday professions.

In views aired generally and in the *Quill*, editor Gordon carefully separated himself and his involvements from radical positions in art and politics. Disagreeing with many contemporaries, he refused to see American Negroes as a separate people, as part of an African past rather than an American present and future. He expressed his opinions at length in *The Messenger*, where he said, essentially, that ‘the blacks of America are beginning to realize that their future lies in America, and not in Africa, or with the dead kings of Egypt; that they are no longer more to Africa, and will never again be more to Africa, than are their white compatriots to Caucasia’. 27

Gordon continued in the same vein in the *Quill*. In his editorial for the first issue, he urged his associates to look to the ground on which they stood, not to hanker after some distant jungle. Basically, he considered the Negro writer to be as American as apple pie:

> The colored artist is trained in the same schools that train the white artist, and at the hands of the same instructors. He gets the same stereotyped formulas of technique and style. He stands to the rendering of the Star Spangled Banner, and even, at times, tries to sing it. He salutes the flag throughout the farthest reaches of the land; eats baked beans and brown bread on Saturday night, in Boston; sneers, in New York, at ‘the provinces’; falls in line to shake the President’s hand at New Year’s, in the District of Columbia; laughs at the comic strip; and he worships wealth and caste in true American fashion.

Gordon realized that black artists had some rich sources unavailable to whites, but he asserted that Negro writers must use the ‘same method’ and ‘the same medium’ or language available to white authors. 28

To further his views, Gordon included an essay by William Edward Harrison, Harvard-trained journalist, in the third number of the *Quill*. Like Gordon, Harrison said that American blacks could hardly look for inspiration to Africa, which was surely a ‘terra incognita’ after some three hundred years. Summarizing Gordon’s ideas, he claimed that black writers should use materials from their own environment in an effort to reach out to all people, black and white: ‘This literature must be at once profoundly racial and still

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27 'Group Tactics And Ideals', *The Messenger*, 8 (December 1926), 361. See Gordon’s comments also in ‘The Contest Winners’, *Opportunity*, 5 (July 1927), 204.

28 ‘A Word in Closing’, *Quill*, 1 (June 1928), 72.
universal in its appeal.' He then stated opinions which were held by other Club members but had not been explicitly asserted in the Quill. Looking to the success of the Boston and Philadelphia literary organizations, Harrison asserted that Harlem could no longer be the moving force in the Negro Renaissance. The 'Harlem theme' had 'grown stale', as had writers like Thurman and George Schuyler:

Through the efforts of these and their satellites Harlem, the Negro quarter of New York, has been relegated to the place of a satrapy of Babylon or Sodom; it is the epitome of the bizarre and the unregenerate asylum of Vice in capitals, if we may trust these literati; it means somehow knowing nods and winks, and suggests forbidden diableries.29

By the turn of the decade, many reviewers agreed that the Harlem theme was indeed 'stale'. Writers for the New York Amsterdam News and the Commonweal, among others, called the Quill the best of all the Negro little magazines. A reporter for the Amsterdam News urged 'Harlem writers' to follow the 'example' of the Boston group, while the reviewer for Commonweal praised the journal for its 'admirable absence of jazz and Harlem posturings...'. W. E. B. Du Bois liked the fresh beginning he saw in the Quill and commended the journal in Crisis: 'Of the booklets issued by young Negro writers in New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere, this collection from Boston is by far the most interesting and the best... It is well presented and readable and maintains a high mark of literary excellence.' Charles Johnson, in an unsolicited letter, went so far as to call the journal one of the few solid artistic achievements of the decade: 'Here we have what seems to me the best evidence of a substantial deposit after the feverish activity of the last few years.'30

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As the Great Depression began, the Quill came to an end, as had its predecessors. By 1930, only one Negro literary periodical remained, and that was Stylus, which had led the way for the others. During the 1920s, Stylus had remained strangely quiescent, presumably in part because Alain Locke and his Howard associates preoccupied themselves with artistic happenings elsewhere, specifically in Harlem, Boston and Philadelphia. After issuing the second number of Stylus in 1921, they waited until June 1929 to issue number three. And then, in the middle of the Depression, they reinstituted the journal

29 'The Negro's Literary Tradition', Quill, 1 (June 1930), 6, 8.
30 'Excerpts from Comments on the First Number of The Saturday Evening Quill', 1 (April 1929), inside front cover; 'Excerpts from Comments on the Previous Numbers of the Saturday Evening Quill', 1 (June 1930), inside front cover; W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Browsing Reader', 35 (September 1928), 301.
on a more regular, annual basis. They were able to continue because of University funding, and also because of the loyal support of such Honorary Members as Lewis Alexander, William Stanley Braithwaite, Charles Chestnutt, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Arthur Schomburg and Jean Toomer.

From his perspective on the Howard campus, Locke studied the 1920s and presented his conclusions in 'Beauty and the Provinces', an essay published in the 1929 *Stylus*. He began his remarks with new definitions, calling a capital a centre for creative work and a province a place empty of poets, a place 'where living beauty...is not'. Using these definitions, Locke pointed to New York as the capital of the United States and to Harlem — 'the mecca of the New Negro' — as the vitality of that capital. Washington, D.C., on the other hand, was a province, in touch only with the 'nation's body'. It was not, wrote Locke, 'the capital of its mind or soul'. The District could have become a true capital only if 'Negro Washington' had dropped its 'borrowed illusions' and encouraged its wealth of 'intellectual and cultural talent'. Had this happened, the 1920s could have been known as the Washington Renaissance rather than the Harlem Renaissance. As it was, the District 'merely yielded a small exodus of genius that went out of the smug city with passports of persecution and returned with visas of metropolitan acclaim'.

Locke blamed 'Negro Washington' in general. He never became more specific in his essay, desiring instead to encourage that which merited praise. And thus he turned to 'certain exceptions' in Washington, pointing with 'collective pride' to the 'pioneer work' done by *Stylus*. As Locke remembered, the Howard group was among the first to advocate a Negro literature rooted in racial consciousness, or on 'the foundation of folk-roots and the race tradition'. Locke also remembered the many groups which had followed in other cities, which he mentioned by name. That very enumeration encouraged him, indicating 'what has been accomplished in little more than a decade'. The Negro Renaissance was just beginning, he concluded: 'The provinces are waking up, and a new cult of beauty stirs throughout the land.'

Writing in 1929, Locke could not foretell the shape of the future, even though he knew other Negro literary periodicals had failed and even though he was looking into the face of the Depression. Locke was too close to the times to see them clearly. Those who wrote decades later had a better opportunity to view the 1930s. In his 1966 essay, Langston Hughes commented on

31 In the years following, *Stylus* appeared in 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938 and 1941, which marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the organization and the last number of the journal.
32 *Stylus* (June 1929), front page, pp. 3-4.
the changes wrought by the Depression: 'by the time the thirties came, the voltage of the Negro Renaissance of the twenties had nearly run its course'. Writers of the new decade would not congregate enthusiastically in the small groups which had sponsored the little black magazines of the preceding years, Rather, they would find sustenance in the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration. Looking back nostalgically to the 1920s, Hughes called those years 'Harlem's Golden Era'.

Hughes knew much about the 1920s, but his judgments also need review. Like so many others, he was fascinated by Harlem and thus concentrated on that city in his reminiscences. Such concentration provided valuable insight; at the same time, though, it obscured part of the fuller picture. Harlem did have a 'Golden Era', but the Negro Renaissance of the decade was not circumscribed within the boundaries of that urban area. Negro communities from Boston to Los Angeles also had visions of a 'New Negro' and a new literature. The record of this broader awakening has been forgotten but it is not lost. The story remains, preserved within the surviving copies of the black literary periodicals of the 1920s.

33 'The Twenties', pp. 11–12.
34 Abby Johnson wishes to acknowledge the support she has received from the Faculty Research Program at Howard University.